

## Best Days of My Life by glorious\_spoon

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**Summary:**

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### Author's Note:

For a tumblr prompt by **zivitz**, who wanted Joyce/Hopper

He's sitting on the front porch when Joyce's little car finally trundles up the driveway and squeaks to a halt. He sees her peer over the wheel at him, that sudden jolt of fear in her expression that fades as soon as she realizes that he's not in uniform. She opens the door and climbs out, swinging her bag up onto her shoulder. "Hi, Hop."

"Hey. Not here on business, you can relax."

She smiles a little at that, flickering, as she crosses the dry grass to the porch. It's been a scorching hot summer and her yard is burnt yellow, but it's starting to cool now with the sun sinking behind the trees in the west. "Where's Jane?"

"Same place Will is. That big convention down in Chicago; I didn't ask for details. Harrington is with them, poor sucker. I figured you could use the company."

Joyce tucks her smile into the corners of her mouth, drops down onto the edge of the porch next to him with an awkward, coltish sort of grace that makes her look decades younger than she is, that reminds him of the girl with the long, straight hair and the flowered blouses who used to sneak under the bleachers with him after practice to share smokes and secrets. Make out sometimes too, sure, but it never went much further than that, and when Jim thinks wistfully about it these days, it's not her body under his hands that he remembers the most. It's the way she used to talk, those emphatic gestures, pilfered Lucky Strike tucked between her knuckles and trailing smoke through the air, her bright eyes and quick voice, all of her big dreams.

He had a few of those too, back in the day.

"Smoke?" he asks, offering her the pack.

"I'm trying to quit," Joyce says, with a quicksilver grin as she fishes a cigarette out, tilts her head to let him light it for her. "Jonathan is going to be so mad at me."

"I won't tell if you won't," Jim says dryly, and she laughs out loud. Pushes her frizzy, greying hair behind her ears, one handed, blows smoke out into the cooling dusk. Jim just watches her familiar profile for a minute before he speaks again. "How's he doing?"

"He's good, he's—" she gestures vaguely with the hand holding the cigarette, trailing smoke through the air. "He's settling in. It's only a few hours away, he'll be able to drive down for weekends, he'll be—I'm being ridiculous about this, aren't I?"

"Nah," Jim says easily, lighting his own cigarette and leaning back on his elbows. It's a nice night out, dry enough that the mosquitos aren't eating him alive, although that could have something to do with the haze of nicotine in the air. Peaceful. It's something that always bored the hell out of him about this town when he was a kid, but he's gained an appreciation for it in recent years.

"No, I am. I am. I'm just... after everything with Lonny, and with Will, having him gone, it's— it's hard."

"I get it." When she glances down at him, he shrugs a little. "I'm gonna be a mess when Jane finally takes off. If Sara had—"

He breaks off, shakes his head. Sara would be about a year older than Jane is now. Ten months, to be exact. He actually had to sit down and work it out in his head the other day, and that made something sad and tired twist up inside him, that at some point he'd stopped knowing exactly how old his daughter would be off the top of his head, and hadn't even noticed.

Joyce makes a soft, wordless noise of understanding, then stretches out on the porch beside him and reaches for his hand. Their fingers tangle together. Hers are small and cool, work-roughened, the nails bitten down to the quick. Familiar. He blows out a mouthful of smoke and turns his head to look at her, her head pillowed on the curve of her arm, one leg hitched up under her, her eyes soft. Thinks about leaning over just that little bit of space and kissing her; it's not the

first time he's had the thought in recent months. Not by a long shot.

Instead, he clears his throat. "You eat yet?"

"Um." Joyce scrunches her face up. "I had a Reese's on the way back."

"Yeah, that doesn't count. You want me to go grab something?"

"No," she says. "I don't. I don't want to be alone. You were right about that. I think there's frozen pizza, though. Jonathan stocked up before he left." Her lips quirk a little, amused. "I think he's worried that Will and I will are both going to starve without him around to cook."

Jim laughs. "Are you?"

"Possibly," Joyce admits, letting go of his hand to push herself up to her feet, bending down to extinguish her smoke on the edge of the concrete step. "I always—I put too much on him. I always did."

"Hey," Jim says. "You did a great job with him. With both of them."

She laughs a little, swipes a hand over her face. "You think so?"

"I know so. Look at him, he's off to college, he's doing great— that sure as hell wasn't Lonnie's doing. That's all you."

"No," Joyce says softly. "That's all him."

"Yeah," Jim says, because it's true, "but you helped. How about that pizza?"

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They burn the pizza, laughing in the kitchen like the pair of college students neither one of them ever really got to be. Joyce has half a handle of cheap rum from God-knows-when in her broom closet, a bottle of cola in the fridge, and they pour too-strong rum and cokes into mismatched coffee cups and go back outside to sit on the front step and watch the fireflies.

It's about halfway through his second slice of pizza, watching Joyce

lick grease off of her fingers under the yellow porch light, that it occurs to Jim that this is the closest he's had to a real date in more than five years.

"What?" Joyce says, glancing up at him, smiling and beautiful, and the thing is, Jim knows exactly what his face is doing, he knows exactly what's showing there. He's never had a poker face worth a damn, not when it really mattered, and Joyce has always been able to see right through him.

He huffs out a laugh, drops his eyes. Twenty-five years, it's been. Twenty-five years, and he's probably never going to be completely over Joyce Horowitz Byers. "Don't worry about it."

"Usually, when someone in this town tells me not to worry about it, the next thing that happens is monsters climbing out of my walls," Joyce says. There's a scrape of ceramic as she sets the coffee cup down on the step. "Hop. *Jim*. Come on."

"Seriously," Jim says, "don't worry about it," and then her hands are on his face, tipping his chin up to look at her. Her expression suddenly mischievous, laughing, *young*.

"Remember that time that Mr. Cooper caught us with your hand halfway up my blouse?"

He does. Vividly. "It was more than halfway, if I'm remembering it right."

"You're right," Joyce says, grinning, "it was."

Her hand is still on his cheek. When she leans down to kiss him, her mouth tastes like sugar syrup and cigarettes and rum.

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They do make it back inside. Eventually. Turns out a bed is a damn sight more comfortable than the bleachers.

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He wakes up alone, slightly hungover, tangled in unfamiliar sheets. Rubs a hand over his face and squints in the morning sunlight coming in through crooked blinds until it dawns on him that he's in Joyce's

house, in Joyce's bed, and Joyce herself is nowhere to be found.

Before he can start to feel some kind of way about that, though, he hears a clatter down the hall, soft cursing. He pulls his boxers on and pads into the kitchen to see Joyce standing at the stove, a bathrobe draped over her shoulders and a spatula in one hand, swearing under her breath at a pan full of— well, it looks like it might have been meant to be scrambled eggs at some point. On the far end of the counter, the coffee pot is hissing softly as it percolates.

"Morning," Jim says quietly, leaning against the door frame, and Joyce jumps about a mile in the air before turning. He puts his hands up. "Sorry. I thought you heard me."

"It's fine, it's fine, I just—" Joyce waves the spatula at the frying pan. She hasn't bothered to belt the bathrobe, and it gapes in the front, displaying a baggy t-shirt that is in fact Jim's, which goes down to mid-thigh on her. Slender pale legs beneath, bare feet on the linoleum floor, and even disheveled and sheepish she's so damn beautiful that he finds himself smiling helplessly at her. Dumbstruck and stupid with it. "Don't laugh. I was going to make breakfast, but I forgot— Jonathan usually cooks in the morning."

"I'm not laughing," he says, although he is a little bit. He wraps his arms around her waist and rests his chin on the top of her head, her hair tickling his nose. "Looks good."

Joyce smacks his arm lightly, then stands on her toes to kiss him on the mouth, as quick and easy as that. Like that's just how it's going to be now, no conversation needed. "No, it doesn't."

"No," he agrees, grinning. "It doesn't. But I bet it'll taste okay."